

SEARCHING FOR LIEUTENANT BREVIK

Russians, Americans Starting Search for Body of US Pilot Killed in Battle Against Japanese

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Today, a US-Russian expedition is starting its search for the body of the US pilot Richard Brevik on Shumshu Island, which is one of the Kuriles. Lt. Brevik was killed in a battle against the Japanese in 1945. Since the territory has changed hands after WWII, it has turned out that his grave is on the Russian territory now. Establishing the exact location of the grave is the expedition's main goal. This search is conducted by the US-Russian Joint Commission on POW-MIAs established in 1992.

On June 16, 1945, three US B-24 bombers flew a combat mission at the area of the Kuril Islands, which entirely belonged to Japan at that time. Near Paramushir Island, they dealt a bomb strike on a group of Japanese Navy ships. The Japanese antiaircraft artillery responded by shooting down one of the US aircraft, No. 0345. Smoking, the bomber started leaving the combat area, but soon fell into the water. Corporal William V. Cavanaugh and Lieutenant Richard Brevik managed to get into an inflated life raft, but the rest of the crew died in the crash.

For three days, the raft with Brevik and Cavanaugh was drifting in the open sea. During that time, the badly wounded lieutenant died. Finally, the raft got noticed by sailors of a Japanese destroyer heading to the Kataoka naval base located on Shumshu. The Japanese picked up Cavanaugh and his dead comrade. Lt. Brevik was buried on Shumshu. Corporal Cavanaugh was sent to a POW camp. After the war, the corporal submitted a detailed report describing the circumstances of the aircraft loss and the death of his fellow crewmembers.

Shumshu Island is a Russian territory now, and the memories of Corporal Cavanaugh have become the main guiding document for the workgroup engaged in searching for Lt. Brevik's body. Today, with archival search completed and organizational issues settled, the group is starting its work on Shumshu.

The group represents a part of the US-Russian Joint Commission on POW-MIAs, which was established by decision of the US and Russian presidents in March 1992. Both countries' history contains episodes in which Soviet and US troops either stood side by side fighting a common enemy (e.g. during World War II), or vice versa confronted each other on the battlefield – like in Korea or Vietnam – and in local incidents of the Cold War. The task of establishing the fate of both sides' MIAs, locating the dead, and burying them with due military honors is part of the Commission's work, and the story of Lt. Brevik is just one of such episodes.

The expedition searching for the remains of Lt. Brevik consists of eight persons. In this group, Russia is represented by the Commission's deputy chairman Konstantin Golumbovskiy and consultant Natalya Levina. The US expedition members are James Shonborn, Robert Smith, and Ralph McCall, as well as three experts from the US Army Central Identification Laboratory in Hawaii (CILHI.) It is expected that the search will take ten days. The expedition's success depends on several factors. First, a lot depends on the weather, since the searching party will be stationed in Petropavlovsk Kamchatsky and will fly to Shumshu by helicopter. The regularity of these flights depends entirely on weather conditions. The second important factor is associated with the search process itself. Corporal Cavanaugh was not present at Brevik's burial, and the only information he possessed was received from the Japanese during his interrogation. For this reason, the exact location of the grave is unknown. The Americans believe that it may be located in the territory of the old Japanese cemetery, and this is what needs to be clarified. In addition, the island located in the border zone is unpopulated. After the naval base was liquidated, only several persons remained there to service the lighthouse. The island is overgrown with shrubs, and exploring its 180-square-mile territory will not be easy. Third, using this opportunity, the expedition intends – in addition to the search for Lt. Brevik's remains – to clarify the details of another similar episode by examining the wreckage of a US aircraft which crash-landed in Kamchatka forests in 1945. This will take time as well. This is why consultant Natalya Levina would rather call it a preliminary survey. If it proves successful, the expedition will continue its work.

The Commission's work has already produced positive results. "In the year 2000, we already did some excavations on the Mutnovskaya Hill in Kamchatka together with the Americans," Ms. Levina tells. "A US Lockheed Ventura bomber crashed there in 1944. We managed to find the remains of two crewmembers and personal belongings of other pilots. Canadian TV was shooting a film on that work. In 1994, the remains of the US pilot John Dunham, shot down by Soviet air defense artillery in November 1952, were discovered on Yuriy Island, handed over to the Americans, and buried in Arlington Cemetery with military honors."